

Building Corporate Memories

In a safe, secure, private environment



People
Discussions
Decisions
Activities
Resources

Remembering More Than Numbers



We are a Canadian leader in creating corporate communities of practice

Building Corporate Memories

The next step in knowledge management

By John B Voorpostel *CPA, CA*
Chartered Memory Steward
© 2019 All rights reserved

This white paper is for anyone considering knowledge management in a business context and especially for those who are dissatisfied because of their experience with it.

Before reading it, take a minute or two to reflect on following sayings. In tandem with our People, Discussions, Decisions, Activities, Resources approach to building corporate memories, they underpin what we've done about it.

*Data is all in the universe,
Information is just like a mine
With knowledge and **now**ledge
It's ore, and with tools,
Know how doing makes all of it thine*

*Knowledge is NOT power. It is merely potential.
Know-how on the other hand, moves mountains*

Wisdom is knowing what questions to ask

*Resources are a means of any kind
valued not by how much they cost,
but in how they are deployed.*

*Businesses have strategic memories to remember
based in their collaborative activities and envisioned end state*

A business, and any complex entity for that matter, is in the minds and imaginations and memories of the people who engage in discussions, decisions and activities, and who deploy their resources towards some envisioned end state that serves the *raison d'être* of the business.



Knowledge management is in some ways still an emerging discipline despite much academic and entrepreneurial activity over the last 30 or so years. Authors and software vendors staked out their positions and definitions and options and add-ons so that there is no clear solution or consensus about what knowledge management is and can do.

This is evidenced in Bain & Company's annual listing of management tools that has consistently seen a dichotomy between the adoption of knowledge management in a company and their overall satisfaction with it. Part of the dissatisfaction stems from cultural issues, but much rests in expectations and the choice of the knowledge management toolset.

So why does Info L inc think differently than others?

First, we did not take a search engine and call it a knowledge management tool, nor do we believe that document management, data warehouses, or groupware are knowledge management solutions. Not that these types of tools are useless or irrelevant. They certainly manage information, and have their uses. But to rebrand tools that manage information as knowledge management solutions is a stretch.

Instead, we use the terms corporate memory, corporate memory development, and corporate memory building when we discuss knowledge management, plus we take a Communities of Practice approach. This immediately positions us around people collaborating and building an enterprise memory of their activities; where they want to end up, what they do, who they do it with, how they do it, what they learn along the way, how they know they are getting there, and a host of other things that reflect what, as Peter Drucker might say, they "look like".

Secondly, we have our roots in small businesses, where understanding what is going on is much easier than trying to figure out the "black box" that is a large enterprise.

Thirdly, our founder, John Voorpostel, is a chartered professional accountant with many years of experience and an academic background in economics. This has given us some unique insights into resources, and allowed us to work from a sound set of theories that reflect the reality of what a business does.

All this has led us to formulate rule number 1.



It's all about people, discussions, decisions, activities and resources.

To us, knowledge management is how an organization enables people to communicate, collaborate and contribute to their collective experience in order to improve what they do.

Our view stems from our observation and theory that nothing happens unless someone does something, and in business doing things is all about people collaborating and deploying resources to make what they envision happen. What is important to take away from all this is that we start with the reality of what a business is and does. We call it rule number one because it underpins our approach to understanding what memories are important.

Since business strategy is the result of an envisioning process and deciding how to get there, any knowledge management approach must facilitate this. It can then also, over time, help companies do what they do better.

Rule number 2 addresses the question of knowledge itself.

Most everyone knows the old saying that knowledge is power. Widely attributed to Sir Francis Bacon, who formulated the Scientific Method, this phrase has been used over and over again to underscore the importance of knowledge.

We believe it is wrong, perhaps generally, but certainly as applied to knowledge management.

*Knowledge is NOT power. It is merely potential.
Know-how on the other hand, moves mountains.*

From a philosophical perspective, power is the ability to influence reality, best described as circumstance, time and place. Knowledge itself cannot do this.

Knowledge is simply potential, articulated, but waiting to be understood and used. Peter Drucker, who famously wrote about knowledge workers and the knowledge economy, also noted it is really all about what is done with knowledge that matters.



The difference between knowledge and know how is like the difference between water and getting the horse to drink it, or sailing on it, or using it for irrigation. Academics define express knowledge, articulated knowledge embedded in documents, books and other teaching materials, and tacit knowledge, the knowledge and experience of the craft. Tacit is actual know how that gets things done. This means that knowledge management solutions that focus on knowledge and its gathering and organization and presentation are on the wrong track. Solutions must focus on putting the important knowledge to work.

That is why we say know how moves mountains. What exactly do we do, when do we do it, and what with? How can we do it better?

The purpose of these questions and their related discussions is to plan some desired reality, an end state, some circumstance, place and time. This reality is best described using stories that talk about who what when where why and how, and driven by “what if?” and “is?” and “how could we?”.

In this exchange there is a group focus on a task or objective at hand, so people discuss important related ideas, facts, meanings, assumptions, guesses, points of view etc., all framed by some greater status quo.

This mirrors what Karl Eric Sveiby, the acknowledged founding father of knowledge management noted when he talks about “Knowledge Focus” as describing a mindset and a human vision, not a technological solution.

This leads us to Rule Number 3

Wisdom is knowing what questions to ask

The most important, most valuable resource is the insightful, empowering question that directs you onward, that opens up the mind to further ideas and more relevant questions. These questions come from experienced people who have faced the issues before, and who have an understanding of where the questions and decisions can lead to, and who can foresee the issues that will be encountered.



But good questions are also posed by the naïve. Their questions are valuable because they often challenge you to think about the fundamentals, the assumptions. They are like the child asking “why is the sky blue?” and a chain of “but why?” that forces you to rethink something from the very basics. This chain of “why is that?” and “walk me through that” often clarifies issues and makes for better informed decisions.

If you recognize it is all about people and their ideas meeting and interacting, it’s important to keep memories of all the important questions, discussions, decisions, strategies, activities, resources, and related business requirements, all in some meaningfully organized taxonomy, so that you can easily and quickly access what you need, almost like opening a book.

Putting it in more academic terms, you need both the tacit and the explicit, organized in some meaningful way. We argue this “meaningful way” is around their related strategies, tasks and requirements. That way, as you work, you use and augment what you know about it, and develop the work product that relates to it. You can then find the required knowledge, know how, discussions, decisions, strategies and resources of a particular activity all in one place.

To this point we’ve talked about knowledge and strategy, but not much about resources. We’ve purposefully left it to last because it deserves some attention and development.

First off, Rule Number 4

Resources are a means of any kind valued not by how much they cost, but in how they are deployed.



If you have studied economics, you know that the “classic” resources are land, labour and capital. This is useful because it allows for the simple analysis, but it ignores today’s real world.

In today’s modern economy, a resource is a means of any kind. It could be a business model, knowledge or information that only you have, a distribution licence, technology, time, effort, focus, in fact a resource is anything you use to achieve what you set out to do.

What is most relevant is that the real value of a resource is in its deployment, meaning strategy determines a resource’s value. Hence a resource can have many values, and used incorrectly, may even yield a value that is below what it originally cost.

So how does we as Canadian accountants deal with resources?

We do not traditionally measure them all. We limit our vision to producing financial statements that measure historical results according to International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) or Accounting Standards for Private Enterprises (ASPE). What we do is focus on dollar measures processed through a chart of accounts. We then track these dollars and produce financial statements and reports that are all about what happened in the past.

Does this mean that accountants have it wrong? Is a focus on historical cost, fair market value etc. somehow wrong?

Not really. Accounting is about keeping score. It measures income, taxable income, what things actually cost, dollar and event based performance, and a host of valuable information, and is an important part of developing a corporate memory.

But it is only part of a total corporate memory solution which CPA Canada acknowledged in a recent set of publications Drivers of Future Value.

Business is all about people, discussions, decisions, activities and resources, which is all about know how and doing, which is all about the questions that have been asked. This thinking is reflected in our approach and why we use the Communities of Practice approach.



We organize business strategies and requirements into a taxonomy, or framework, and each part of a strategy gets a place in that taxonomy. We also add ready to deploy business know how in the form of frameworks and check lists, so unlike Open Text and Microsoft Sharepoint, which come out of the box as a Tabula Rasa, or blank slate, we provide a great head start to business owners and directors and their teams. These organized, ready to deploy business requirements and strategies are the main feature that sets our thinking apart.

Privacy, Security, Simplicity

Email was never designed with security in mind because no one foresaw it becoming one of the primary means of communication in business. What you send and receive via your email client and its transfer protocols is transferred entirely out in the open and readable by anyone who can monitor internet and network traffic. It is also vulnerable on your device, your network, your server and on your recipient's devices.

Encryption is an answer but the sender and recipients have the required keys. But the message and attachments are still travelling along interceptable routes and therefore subject to brute force attacks.

Web browsers on the other hand interact directly with web servers. This means you can set up a best practices perimeter defence to secure your own servers and prevent malicious scripts from affecting a user's browser as they access and interact with the server and software it hosts.

Access to a server hosted Community of Practice forum and its various boards and discussions is controlled via user names and passwords, making it private and secure, and all information resides in a database that sits safely and securely on your server, behind your firewall. Furthermore, the database cannot be directly accessed without a lengthy character password that is embedded into the forum software.

And because the conversation happens inside the forum, you will always be able to modify the message, so no more sending off the wrong message to the wrong person.

And it also means no spam, danger from phishing, and, because collaboration and communication is organized around your activities, there is no need to constantly organize your inbox.



Implementation

No discussion of knowledge management, or corporate memory development, is complete without addressing the people and culture component.

Bain & Company and others note that it can be hard getting the broader culture to accept and embrace and thrive in a shared electronic community. They also note that sometimes employees don't share what they consider proprietary or valuable or advantageous to themselves.

But even before that senior management must be won over by the business case which can be challenging as any current management team worth their salt has addressed at least some of the key issues a community of practice can solve, meaning they are currently invested in technology, methods and routines getting them solved.

Whatever their "hot buttons" may be, once senior management, generally via the leadership of a respected champion, gives the go ahead, you must begin the adoption process by bringing in a core group of well chosen, key employees, and to grow it out from there.

This roll out from a core group allows the culture time to learn to accept and adopt a business focused community of practice so it works as designed. The core group must include one or two key, passionate, champions and drivers who can engage and encourage and inspire and energize, and drive the group and the process from the beginning and onward into the future. And they must be well rewarded for their success. This means appropriate KPIs.

Senior management and community leaders must also recognize and reward and share successes, and get the story out, because as the founding group sees the rewards, others will want to be part of it. After all, participation and sharing is at the heart of people, discussions, and their decisions.



About Info L inc

We are a Canadian leader in the creation and use of Communities of Practice as a corporate memory building tool able to capture important strategic information about people, discussions, decisions, activities, and resources.

We base our approach on how business actually happens, that is, people collaborating and improvising with others towards a particular purpose or set of goals. It's a collaborative journey with a dedicated purpose. There's a clear bigger picture and best laid plans and strategies, but it is all about a group of people improvising their way towards envisioned solutions, adapting on the way, fine tuning here and there through measurements and reports and changes in methods and techniques.

We believe in the power of the right question, asked by the right people, with the right resources, adapting and growing into their answers.

We believe that all you do and learn and develop on this journey has to be organized into some coherent and easily accessible whole, so that you can easily retrieve what you've done and learned, and effectively draw on it and use it and adapt it and strategically grow it forward.

We believe strongly that a Community of Practice, organized around the raison d'être of a business works, and we verified this with none other than Etienne Wenger, the world's foremost authority on CoPs, as they are known.

We have been creating proprietary archives of business solutions since 1993, and have incorporated our content and proprietary taxonomies into various solutions. That means we have always made our solutions ready to deploy, out of the box, as a tool you use as you work.

Most recently, our focus has been on adapting Simple Machines, an open source community platform into a knowledge management tool that captures tacit business know how, the kind that walks out of your door at night, and that has proven to be elusive to systems designers.

Talk to us. We can show you a demo website.

And if you do engage us to help you create your own knowledge community, we'll help you save thousands of dollars on software licenses. Because we are open source enthusiasts and users. We use, have used, and know about many different useful, stable and fully featured software applications used by many thousands even millions of users world wide.

It means that you can recover our very reasonable fees immediately, both in the know how you gain from our taxonomy and what we embed into Simple Machines, and in real dollar savings by not having to pay for software and their upgrades on EVERY SINGLE MACHINE.

Call us now, John Voorpostel CPA, CA, CMA, at 416-695-4874, or via email at john@infolinc.ca